

TESTIMONY BY JOHN BARKER

SUPERVISOR, CHARTER TOWNSHIP OF UNION, ISABELLA COUNTY

BEFORE THE MICHIGAN SENATE ENERGY AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

JUNE 14, 2011 – 1:00 p.m. meeting

Mr. Chairman,

My name is John Barker and I am the Supervisor of one of the fastest growing communities in Michigan, the Charter Township of Union that surrounds the City of Mount Pleasant and Central Michigan University.

Our community of 13,000 people is one of 12 members of the Mid-Michigan Area Cable Consortium and we have been involved in collaborative efforts at the local level since 1997, well before collaboration became a public policy household word. We are a forward looking community dedicated to excellence in every area of our operations.

I am here today to raise some concerns and perhaps provide some insight to you and your committee about the impact of PA 480 on my community and the people I represent. Before I do that, however, I wish to state that I have decades of experience in the corporate world and in local government and I am seriously concerned about the attitude that seems to be emerging that Lansing knows better how to run our local governments than we do.

I suppose there are those of you who pay lip service to the concept that the closer government is to the people, the better citizens can be served and affect what government does to and for them. But more and more now I am seeing coming out of Lansing an attitude that local government officials are idiots and that Lansing knows better about how our local governments should be run. I am aware that there are a few communities that are not as well managed as ours, but I am unconvinced that state government knows better about what our communities need than we do at the local level.

I would be pleased to compare my resume, credentials and experience against yours, but I can assure you I do know what I am doing, what my community needs, what best practices in local government really means and how we could do a better job using government closest to the people to better regulate our local cable franchises and how our public right of ways are being used.

I am not happy with PA480 even though it may have had the best of intentions when originally passed. To borrow an old phrase, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

PA 480 was supposed to provide more competition, more jobs and better service to our communities. The idea, I suppose, is that government regulations are a bad thing. It's a nice catchy phrase, but in our modern age we've found that effective regulations, effectively administered are essential to living in a complex modern society and at the local level we are directly responsible to our citizens and how those regulations affect them. I see PA 480 as an attempt to take power away from local governments and place it in the hands of the state, but PA 480 has not lived up to the promises made.

Simplistic ideology makes for good sound bites, but not good public policy. Those of us who have been involved in managing corporations and local governments for a number of years realize that we need to put our political feelings aside and start working together in a pragmatic way dealing with real facts to come up with balanced measures that meet the needs of our people and not just telecommunication providers.

In Union Township we have not seen hoards of providers swarming into our community to provide real alternatives and real competition to Charter Communications. We have seen our cable and telecom packages increasing in price, however, and that is what we were hoping competition would save us from.

We recently got notice too that the previously low cost TV service to township hall ~~is~~<sup>7</sup> went from \$5 to \$55. It is one of many ways we keep abreast of weather alerts, but we have decided to explore other alternatives.

And my assessor tells me that Charter Communications has been less than cooperative in reporting its personal property. In fact, they are one of the worst offenders in our community for under reporting their personal property.

I also wish to express to you the importance that public access channels, the educational channels and the government channels play in my community. Members of my community can watch everything their township government does on cable TV since all of our township board meetings, our planning commission meetings and even the meetings of our zoning board of appeals are taped and broadcast by MAC-TV, our consortium community access organization. Before PA480 came along we were able to negotiate on behalf of our community and our partner communities how our PEG channels would operate.

Now we see increasing threats and unwelcome changes to our local community television channels which provide transparency and information to our community. And we have precious little opportunity again to affect what happens in our community.

PA480 has proven itself to be an unwelcome change in Union Township.

PA 480 promised more competition and lower prices. That didn't happen in my community and I suspect many other communities in our state had the same experience.

PA 480 promised more jobs, but we have no way of determining if that ever happened since there is no evidence that happened in our community.

PA 480 promised better service, but the situation in our community is that we have had more complaints and our hands are tied since we have no leverage now to help to resolve those complaints. Although I have little control over the problems my residents complain to me about, I don't have the luxury of passing the buck.

I know many of you were not here when PA480 was initially passed in 2006, so I can't point any fingers in your direction. But for those of you who did play a role in adopting PA 480, I think you have some soul searching to do and some homework as well. I would ask you to reconsider what you have done and yes, consider repealing PA 480 and at the very least to consider the needs of us at the local level to play more of a role in deciding the future of our communities.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for your time. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have either now or later.

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